Working Toward
EXCELLENCE
THE JOURNAL OF
THE ALABAMA
BEST PRACTICES CENTER

WINTER/SPRING 2003 VOLUME 3 ~ NUMBERS 1&2 ~ DOUBLE ISSUE

Four Schools That Teach So All Students Learn

Can high-poverty schools become high performers? These Alabama schools offer proof that savvy educators can beat the odds.

IN THIS DOUBLE-ISSUE of *Working Toward Excellence*, we share stories and data from four Alabama schools that are exceeding expectations — often in dramatic fashion.

These days we are hearing a lot about "achievement gaps" among various subgroups in our schools. Using the "big stick" of federal funding, the No Child Left Behind law is pressuring states to hold schools accountable if they fail to close the traditional performance gaps between white and minority students, and between students who come from different socio-economic backgrounds. In Alabama, accountability for subgroup performance is just around the corner.

When we talk about "narrowing the achievement gap," we are really talking about the need to teach disadvantaged children more effectively. In their heart of hearts, some educators do not believe this is possible. The hard evidence from our four schools proves them wrong.

The educators in these four ordinary schools are accomplishing something extraordinary by leveraging small successes into large-scale improvement over time. Each of these schools has something to tell us about how committed educators can help poor and minority children achieve at levels far beyond the norm.

Different and alike

These four schools are different in many ways. Two are inner-city schools that serve mostly minority, mostly poor children. One school's faculty has a long history of innovation; the second school has found faith and purpose under a dynamic leader. The two other schools in our sample serve more diverse populations. One is a magnet school where more than half the students qualify for the subsidized lunch program. The other school has accepted the challenge to change itself as the community it serves is rapidly changing around it.

These four schools are also alike in many ways. Educators in these schools work hard. They care. They expect a lot. They are coming to understand what makes any school "high-performing."

Are these schools unique? Are they so rare that skeptics can write them off as aberrations? Not according to a highly respected Washington research group. The Education Trust analyzed a massive new U.S. Department of Education school performance database and identified, across the United States, 3,592 high-performing, high-poverty schools; 2,305 high-performing,

Continued on page 2.

ONTHEWEB

The Gap: Causes and Cures

Addressing the Achievement Gap, produced by the Washington State Department of Public Instruction, includes two chapters of interest to all educators. Chapter 3 summarizes research about the root causes of achievement gaps and the conditions that tend to perpetuate them. Chapter 4 looks at steps schools can take to begin closing the gap.

http://tinyurl.com/5t0q

SCHOOLS THAT BEAT THE GAP

ALABAMA BEST PRACTICES CENTER
comments@bestpracticescenter.org

Working Toward Excellence is a quarterly publication of the Alabama *Best Practices Center.* The Best Practices Center, located in Montgomery, works to identify and promote promising education practices, with an emphasis on staff development for teachers and administrators. It collaborates with existing organizations such as the State Department of Education, higher education, local school systems and schools, the regional inservice centers and others. It is facilitated by the A+ Education Foundation, with the generous support of the BellSouth Foundation and the State of Alabama. For more information, call (334) 279-1886.

John Norton, *Editor*
Sara Day Hatton, *Contributing writer*

FOUR SCHOOLS THAT TEACH
Continued from page 1.

high-minority schools, and 1,320 high-performing, high-poverty-and-minority schools. Not enough, to be sure. But enough to dispel the myth that it just can't be done.

Over the last decade, under the hot light of high-stakes accountability, education researchers have probed some of these highly challenged, high-performing schools, searching for their secrets. As one reads through these studies (several are summarized on pp. 10-11), certain indicators appear again and again. These same indicators emerge in our stories of four norm-defying Alabama schools.

The secrets of their success

Leadership. In our four schools, administrators and teachers share leadership. Principals are leaders of leaders, challenging teachers to find solutions and raise performance. They create opportunities for teacher leadership while keeping the school sharply focused on results for students. Teachers identify themselves as professionals with special skills and knowledge who have accepted the task of insuring that all students achieve. As professionals, they understand that they share responsibility for the whole school's success, and not just for the students in their own classrooms.

High expectations. In these schools, the well-worn phrase "high expectations" applies to both students and teachers. There is an implicit contract between them: "We expect you to work very hard to succeed, and you can expect us to work very hard to make sure that you do." Teaching is never one-dimensional. Teachers use multiple strategies that address different student learning styles, including projects and other inquiry-based approaches that challenge students to think more deeply, apply their new knowledge and skills, and become self-motivated learners. When students lag behind or surge ahead, they are drawn into small-group instruction and after-school tutoring programs to meet their special needs.

Constant monitoring of student progress. These schools focus on mastery, not the rote completion of lessons and units. For that reason, they constantly monitor student progress using a variety of assessment tools. They are data-driven in the best sense, hungry for any information that will expand their understanding of learning issues that affect individual students, classrooms, or the whole school.

Professional learning. Educators in these schools have established what Dennis Sparks, executive director of the National Staff Development Council, describes as a "high-performance culture." They feel supported by administrators and have strong bonds of connection to colleagues. They are, in Sparks' words, "aggressively pursuing a collective vision for student learning about which they feel passion and commitment." As a result, these educators constantly seek out opportunities to acquire new content knowledge, instructional skills and other tools that will help students grow. And they share what they are learning with one another.

Parent outreach. Parents are not the enemy in these schools, nor do they serve as a convenient excuse for the lack of progress of their children. Educators reach out to parents, trying to explain what learning is like in their classrooms and working to enlist the support of parents at home. They create opportunities for parents to join in the life of the school and share learning experiences with their kids. If need be, educators in these schools pressure parents to live up to their responsibilities. If

ALABAMA ACHIEVEMENT GAP ANALYSIS
SAT-9 2002 – Average Percentile Scores

SUBJECT	% White[1]	White[3]	Black[3]	State Gap	% Fully Paid Lunch[2]	Fully Paid Lunch[3]	Free Lunch[3]	State Gap
3rd Reading	59%	61	34	**27**	47%	63	36	**27**
4th Reading	59%	65	37	**28**	47%	68	39	**29**
5th Reading	60%	62	35	**27**	49%	64	36	**28**
6th Reading	60%	63	36	**27**	50%	65	37	**28**
8th Reading	61%	61	35	**26**	55%	62	37	**27**
3rd Math	59%	63	40	**23**	46%	66	41	**25**
4th Math	59%	65	40	**25**	47%	67	42	**25**
6th Math	60%	69	43	**26**	50%	71	44	**27**
8th Math	61%	62	36	**26**	55%	64	37	**27**
5th Science	59%	65	36	**29**	48%	67	38	**29**
8th Science	61%	70	40	**30**	55%	71	42	**29**

1. Percentage of Alabama students tested in this grade/subject who were white.
2. Percentage of Alabama students tested in this grade/subject who paid full price for school lunch. The free lunch column does not include reduced-lunch students.
3. Average percentile score.

every effort to engage parents fails, these educators can still be heard saying, "It's *our* job to teach these kids."

A can-do spirit. Collectively, the educators in these schools never suffer a loss of faith. When a colleague experiences doubt or frustration, others are there to reassure and help find solutions. In her study of high-poverty, high-performing schools in Louisiana, researcher Dale Hair found the same qualities we discovered in our four Alabama schools. "They are human bulldozers. They literally just roll over obstacles and they believe that no obstacle is too great. When you see this in person, the magnitude of how dramatically different this attitude is from that in high-poverty, low-performing schools really knocks your socks off."

We invite you to spend some time reading our stories about Weaver Elementary in Calhoun County, K.J. Clark Middle and Maryvale Elementary in Mobile, and Central Park Elementary in Birmingham City. With each story, you'll find the name of the principal and the telephone number of the school.

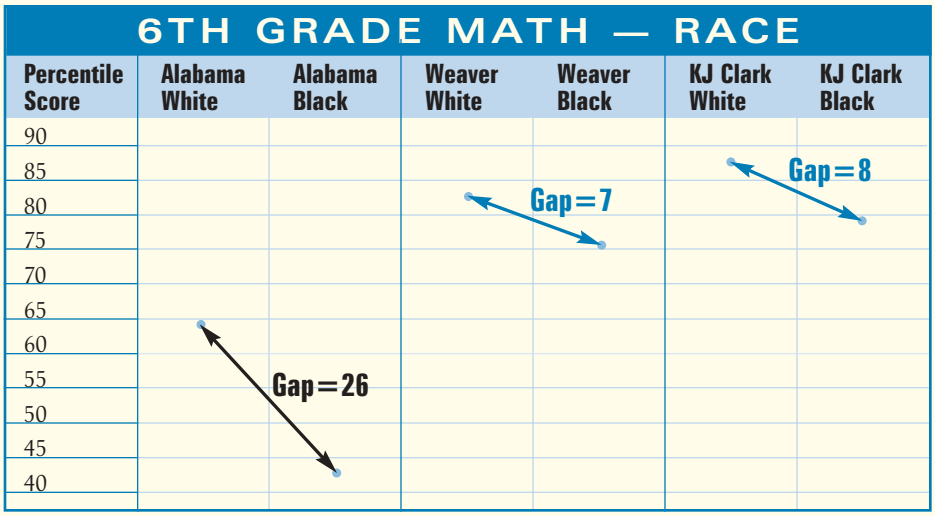
If you'd like to visit, we're sure you'll be welcomed. You will discover that, on the outside, these schools are no different from many other schools in Alabama. They struggle with budgets, overcrowding, aging buildings, and mandates from above. The real difference is on the inside, where many of the people you meet are likely to say: "If we can do it, so can you." Perhaps you've begun already. Let us know. We'd like to tell your story, too.

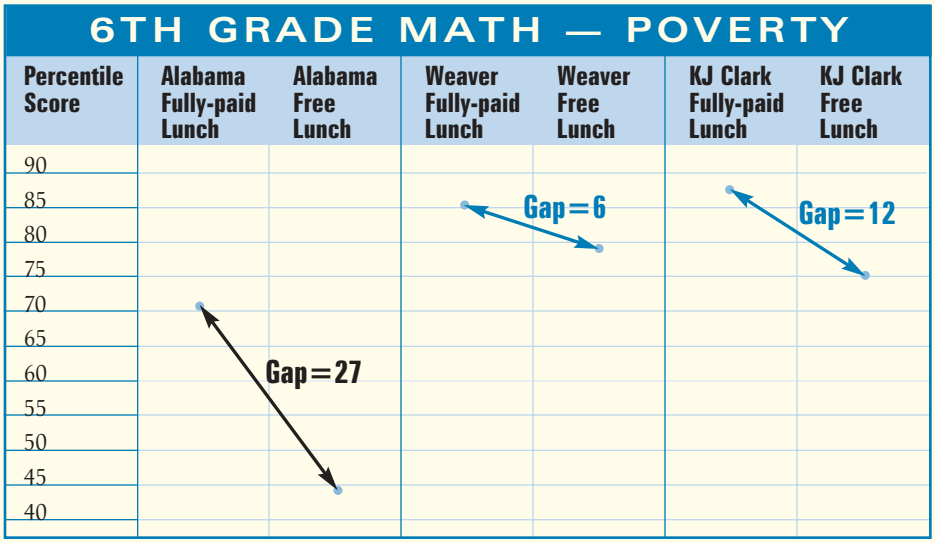
If you'd like to share the work and progress of your school, send us an email at comments@bestpracticescenter.org We'll be in touch! ❖

High Gaps and Low Gaps

When we talk about achievement gaps in a school, it is not enough to simply subtract the average black or free lunch score from the average white or fully-paid lunch score and look at the difference. We also have to ask, "Even if there is a gap, what is the relative performance of free-lunch students or black students in this school compared to state averages or averages in other schools?"

In these two charts, we can see that while Weaver Elementary and KJ Clark Middle do have gaps between white and black students, and between fully-paid and free lunch students, all of their students are performing at high levels compared to state averages.





CENTRAL PARK ELEMENTARY

A School Where Every Child Can Learn — and Does

Students at this inner-city school often outpace their peers in more affluent schools.

THE STATISTICAL BARRIERS are all in place at Central Park Elementary. The overcrowded school serves a highly mobile population of 830 children. About 85 percent of CPE's students qualify for the free and reduced lunch program and a large percentage live in single parent homes.

Central Park is located in a poverty-stricken Birmingham neighborhood, and many people might expect to find an impoverished learning environment inside the school as well. But this is no place for low expectations. The K-5 school vibrates with a positive energy that flows through all six grade levels — an energy that can be seen in the students as they work in classrooms and maneuver through hallways, and in the teachers and administrators as they go about creating a safe and exciting place to learn.

The test results at Central Park are as high as the energy levels. Again and again these students perform at the upper levels on the state's standardized tests, often outpacing their peers in more affluent schools and neighborhoods. What's more, at this Alabama Reading Initiative school, most students are reading on or above their grade levels.

When asked the secret to this success, Principal Bettie Griggs gives a simple four-word answer: "We set high standards."

"No one knows we're a 'Free and Reduced Lunch' school unless they are told," Griggs says. "At Central Park, we believe every child can learn — and they do. We expect the best from all our children."

Leadership for change

Bettie Griggs came to CPE five years ago, committed to high standards, professional development, and strong learning communities. She knew there was a sense of unity at the school before she arrived and wanted to build on that base. She also knew the school faced a tough challenge — the students were not performing at grade level in reading and writing.

In seeking ways to address that challenge, Griggs researched the Alabama Reading Initiative and began to consider the possibility of CPE becoming an ARI site. She shared her thinking with several faculty members, including then-second grade teacher Jacqueline Dent.

"ARI exposes teachers to what research has shown are the best reading and writing teaching practices," Dent says. ARI participants receive training in a broad range of reading strategies, and the program's comprehensive professional development model includes follow-up and ongoing support, both through workshops and through the development of highly skilled, on-site reading coaches (formerly called "specialists").

Before a school can become an ARI site, at least 85 percent of a school's teaching faculty must voluntarily agree to participate. "We had 100 percent," says Dent, who now serves as CPE's reading coach

When an invigorated teaching staff completed the ARI summer training, Dent says, "We reflected on

High Poverty, High Minority

Central Park Elementary School
Birmingham City (K-5)

Principal – Bettie Griggs
Phone – (205) 231-1250

SUBJECT 2002 SAT-9	Alabama Avg. Score[1]	School Avg. Score[1]	Alabama % Free Lunch[2]	School % Free Lunch[2]	Alabama % Minority[3]	School % Minority[3]
3rd Reading	50	**61**	41%	Est. Avg. 80%	39%	99%
4th Reading	55	**70**	40%	Est. Avg. 80%	38%	99%
5th Reading	51	**64**	39%	Est. Avg. 80%	38%	99%
3rd Math	54	**71**	41%	Est. Avg. 80%	39%	99%
4th Math	56	**60**	41%	Est. Avg. 80%	38%	99%
5th Science	54	**55**	40%	Est. Avg. 80%	38%	99%

1. Average percentile score of all students at this grade level/subject.
2. Percent of students at this grade level who quality for free lunch (does not include reduced-price students). Column 5 is based on data provided by the school. Free-lunch data in the state database for 2002 is inaccurate for most or all Birmingham City schools.
3. Hispanic and African American students.

Comments: Central Park Elementary, located in the Ensley area of Birmingham, serves a high-poverty, high-minority population.

Overall performance: Every demographic statistic at Central Park Elementary would predict a performance at the low end of the state's elementary schools. Yet Central Park's average scores for our selected grades/subjects exceeds the state average in every category — frequently by impressive margins.

what we had learned, where we were and where we wanted to go. Although we knew we would all focus on the skills of comprehension, fluency, phonics, phonemic awareness, and language development with our students, Ms. Griggs wanted each grade level to choose one component to target overall. Grades two, three, four and five chose comprehension and the first-grade teachers chose to combine phonics and language development."

Griggs had two other stipulations: Everyone was to implement small group instruction in their classrooms, and everyone was expected to use a variety of assessment tools and data to guide their teaching. "Our teaching at Central Park is very data-driven today," Dent says. Griggs adds: "We've learned how to interpret and use data to guide both our instruction and our professional development."

While the teachers were trying out new reading strategies in the classrooms, other changes were being implemented, including a full-scale mentoring program for novice teachers. "When a first-year teacher comes to teach here, he or she is assigned a mentor for that first year," Dent explains. "That's our formal mentoring program, but actually we *all* mentor each other. We visit each other's classrooms to observe how each person implements teaching strategies we haven't tried. Or when we are not having success with a student with one strategy, we'll ask other teachers for advice. Mentoring goes on all the time here."

Central Park has also developed an unusual approach to lesson planning. At each grade level, Griggs explains, a teacher with a special passion or talent writes lesson plans for a particular subject. These common lesson plans, which include resource and materials lists, become the framework for instruction. This strategy, says Griggs, ensures all students receive comparable instruction, creates more time for teachers to mentor, frees up new teachers to concentrate on refining their teaching, and gives teachers the opportunity to "specialize" in a content area. Teachers have the latitude to enhance or deviate from the plan.

Snapshots from a morning visit

- As the first bell of the day rings, teachers and students wait attentively in their classrooms for the "Vita-Mind" devotional. Each day a different student leads the Pledge of Allegiance, reads an uplifting saying, and then recites the school creed, *Central Park Pride*, which includes the lines: "My uniqueness is what I bring, And I can accomplish anything…I've got that pride, C.P. Pride, down inside." The school counselor then shares two "Words for the Day" which she spells, defines, and uses in a sentence. In the classrooms, teachers are writing the words on the board and will refer to them at various times during the day.
- A consultant from the State Department of Education is here to conduct a day-long writing workshop for 5th grade teachers, whose classes are being covered by substitutes. Later this morning, a member of the Alabama Opera will visit to talk with students about music. The fourth graders will miss this musical chat; they're on their way to explore the planetarium at Birmingham Southern College.
- As we walk through the building, we spy Bettie Griggs animatedly teaching a classroom full of children, something she does regularly. The kids are clearly enjoying the principal's attention.
- In another room, special education students are working on estimation, using three digit numbers. "It ain't goin' to work," says one boy. "Say it correctly," his teacher reminds him, and he repeats his statement in standard English. Griggs tells us that every teacher is expected to instruct students in proper speech and to avoid using slang themselves.
- In a third grade classroom, the teacher is helping students prepare to write in their journals. She asks them to define *descriptive writing*. "It's about feelings." "It's about hearing and taste." "It's about how things smell."
- In a first grade classroom, the teacher is leading a guided reading exercise. Student tasks are outlined on the blackboard. *(1) Write 3 questions. Use a capital letter and a "?" (2) Write your numbers to 99. Write your numbers to 100 by 10's and 5's. (3) Write something you know about walruses.* And a question: *If you were Lars, how would you help Sasha get home?*
- In a kindergarten room, the teacher is sitting in a rocking chair beside a 2-foot cube made of blackboard material. On the block she's written a greeting: "Good morning, boys and girls. It is very cold outside today. How many of you looked at the weather report today?"

  Using a baton, she asks her students what the morning message says, and they read it aloud with alacrity. After a discussion of the weather, the teacher asks the class to look at the first sentence and choose a word that has other, smaller words included in it. One student selects "morning" and identifies "in;" another student identifies "or" in the same word.

  On a nearby desk, we spot the open journal of a kindergarten student. "I like Winter," it reads. "I like to play in the snow. I like to make a snowman. It is cold in Winter. I like the snow more. I like the snow flakes. I like to rid on a sled in Winter. Some animals hibernate in Winter. I am puting on a cot and hat. I like to go ice skating in Winter. It is snowing."

Ongoing staff development

First-grade teacher Cynthia Stinson wears a second hat at Central Park: she coordinates the school's in-house staff development program.

Stinson, one of CPE's two National Board Certified Teachers (several more are in the pipeline), was lured to her coordinator's post by Bettie Griggs, who continuously encourages teachers to become leaders. Like many teachers in the school, Stinson sees professional development as an on-going process that helps teachers adjust to changing times and student needs.

"We're not teaching the same children that were being taught 10 years ago," she says. "We have to adapt our teaching to the children of today. They need to be up and moving around, involved in hands-on learning, practicing skills. I may have them working at a computer, working with each other at tables in small groups or with me, or even playing cards to practice adding and subtracting.

"If I feel there's something else I can do or learn to help them learn, then I want to gain that knowledge or skill. I don't want them to be lacking in an area they need because I'm short of knowledge."

Professional development workshops are a common occurrence at CPE and may be conducted by outside consultants

CENTRAL PARK ELEMENTARY PERFORMANCE COMPARISON
SAT-9 2002 – Average Percentile Scores

SUBJECT	All Central Park Students	All Alabama Students	All Alabama Black Students	All Alabama Free Lunch Students
3rd Reading	**61**	50	34	36
4th Reading	**70**	55	37	39
5th Reading	**64**	51	35	36
3rd Math	**71**	54	40	41
4th Math	**60**	56	40	42
5th Science	**55**	54	36	38

Performance analysis: A typical achievement gap analysis is not useful at Central Park Elementary, where a high percentage of students are minorities and eligible for free/reduced lunch. Here we've compared the scores of all Central Park students with statewide scores for *all* students, all *black* students, and all *free-lunch* students. As the table shows, Central Park has higher scores in all three categories in each grade and subject shown.

or by CPE teachers with expertise in a particular field. Griggs tries to avoid the traditional "after-school inservice" by scheduling sessions during the school day.

"Teachers work hard all day and then they have responsibilities and concerns at home," she says. "I want them to be able to take advantage of professional development during the work day when they are focused on school, rather than what is waiting for them at home."

Professional growth also takes place in more informal settings. Stinson has organized a book club in the school, and a dozen teachers meet regularly to discuss books like *Classrooms That Work* and *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles* by Janice E. Hale.

Griggs says the Hale book was a good choice. "Although our students are primarily from a lower economic level, our teachers and staff are mostly in the middle class economically. *Black Children* addresses a culture that many of us are actually not familiar with, but we must become familiar with it to better serve these children."

How one teacher grew

Through CPE's professional development program, third grade teacher Antonia Gilbert has learned new teaching strategies that are producing dramatic changes in her students' abilities to read and comprehend.

Walking into her classroom, the visitor sees students in pairs, busily passing notes back and forth to each other. What once would have been cause for chastisement is, in Gilbert's class, a writing exercise tied to a reading assignment.

"They've just finished reading and they're writing each other notes with questions and answers about the book," Gilbert explains. "They can either write questions of their own or they can refer to the questions we've written over there." She points to a wall where a list models questions that can help students explore the elements of the book's story line.

Gilbert says she was concerned when she discovered through assessment testing that her students' reading abilities were not at grade level. Her staff development training led her to conclude they needed more concentrated time in class to read on their own.

"They would get a book and read as fast as they could because they knew they only had about 10 minutes to read, and then get another book the next day. We changed it to 30 minutes a day, made sure they chose trade books at their reading level or slightly above, and made sure they completed a book before going on to another. We began to see their interest in reading improve after that."

Students are also required to give an oral book report once a week "to help them with their thinking," Gilbert explains. "At first they dreaded it, but now they like it. As a result of these changes, their reading comprehension has increased."

Through workshops and self-study, Gilbert has also polished her skills in the teaching of writing — another area where some students were struggling. "Now," she says, "when I prompt them to write, we use graphic organizers, brainstorming, and pre-writing exercises. Then they write their first draft. This has helped a lot and now they are doing well."

As she looks across her school, Gilbert can see the impact of professional development rippling up through every classroom. "Five years ago, it was a struggle to get our kids to read.Then the K-2 teachers began an enrichment program through which they combined other subjects with reading. They gave their students the opportunity to choose what they wanted to read. Now, it's easy, no struggle at all. When their 30 minutes of reading time is up, they don't want to stop."

Grooming teacher leaders

Research about effective school practice continues to underscore the importance of teacher collaboration, which requires teachers to assume leadership roles and share their expertise with one another. Bettie Griggs is convinced the research is on-target, and she devotes considerable time to identifying expertise among CPE's teaching staff.

"During class observation, if I see a teacher whose work is exemplary of a strong teaching practice, I don't hesitate to ask the teacher to lead a workshop on that teaching practice. If a teacher leaves school for a day to take professional development, I always ask the teacher to share what they have learned at our next faculty meeting."

Griggs points to full-time reading coach Jacqueline Dent as one product of leadership development in her school. Griggs spotted her talent as a teacher of reading on regular visits to her second-grade classroom and was soon sending teachers from all over the school to observe Dent in action. When the time came to select a new reading coach, Dent had proven she was not only well-qualified but possessed the necessary leadership skills to work effectively with other teachers.

"We need leaders here in our school and in our community," Griggs says. "You either have leaders or you make leaders. I'm in the business of making leaders. If a teacher is shy, I give her or him the opportunity to take a leadership role. I know they can do it. They're professionals." ❖

MARYVALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Doubled Expectations, and Staff Development That Never Ends

At Maryvale Elementary, teachers have "intensity" stamped on their foreheads.

LET'S SUPPOSE YOU are lucky enough (and good enough) to be hired as a brand-new teacher at Maryvale Elementary School in Mobile County. What might you expect?

Perhaps you'll see doubtful expressions on the faces of friends and family as you tell them Maryvale is what some educators call a "90/90" — an inner-city school where more than 90 percent of students are minorities from low-income families. Their expressions may change from doubtful to curious when you add that Maryvale recently earned an "A" on the state's achievement/ability index, and the school's educators are fond of telling students: "You have college stamped on your forehead!"

As a condition of being hired, you've committed to a prodigious amount of professional training. "Staff development is ongoing at Maryvale," says principal Terri Tomlinson. "It never ends here." Every new teacher agrees to be trained in the Talents Unlimited school reform model (Maryvale is a national demonstration site) and the Six Traits writing model (several teachers on staff are certified trainers). Maryvale is also a charter member of the Maysville Math Initiative (MMI), which requires two initial weeks of intensive summer training, ongoing staff development throughout the year, and annual summer refreshers.

There's more. Maryvale's professional staff begins each year with preservice days (adding two extra days to the state requirement). "Each school year we focus on something we've agreed we need to improve on," says Tomlinson. "This year our focus has been on writing. Our preservice days are being supplemented by four Saturday workshops. We felt like we needed all-day training so the teachers receive stipends to come on all four Saturdays." Old-fashioned inservice was never like this!

You will soon discover that your "extra" work as a new Maryvale teacher extends beyond staff development. Tomlinson is a great believer in the linkage between parent support and student achievement, and teachers not only participate in PTO and parent conferencing, but in popular "family nights" where parents join their kids in hands-on math, science and reading activities, and even take Accelerated Reader tests with them.

As you interact with your new Maryvale colleagues, you'll begin learn a new vocabulary, sprinkled with words like "calibration," "retooling," and "dipsticking." You haven't wandered into an auto shop class. These terms reflect Maryvale's commitment to continuous, accurate assessment of student and school progress. More on that later.

You're a new teacher — or at least new to this school — so you can expect a significant amount of support as you make your transition into this vibrant learning community. Each new teacher is assigned a grade-level mentor — "someone who will watch out for them and help them," Tomlinson says. The

Continued on page 8.

High Poverty, High Minority

Maryvale Elementary School
Mobile County (K-5)

Principal – Terri Tomlinson
Phone – (251) 471-1379

SUBJECT 2002 SAT-9	Alabama Avg. Score[1]	School Avg. Score[1]	Alabama % Free Lunch[2]	School % Free Lunch[2]	Alabama % Minority[3]	School % Minority[3]
3rd Reading	50	**55**	41%	83%	39%	100%
4th Reading	55	**58**	40%	84%	38%	96%
5th Reading	51	**49**	39%	76%	38%	100%
3rd Math	54	**67**	41%	81%	39%	100%
4th Math	56	**65**	41%	85%	38%	96%
5th Science	54	**63**	40%	75%	38%	100%

1. Average percentile score of all students at this grade level/subject.
2. Percent of students at this grade level who quality for free lunch (does not include reduced-price students).
3. Hispanic and African American students.

Comments: Maryvale Elementary School, located in inner-city Mobile, serves a high-poverty, high-minority population.

Overall performance: Maryvale's student demographics would suggest performance levels at the low end of the state's elementary schools. Yet Maryvale's average scores for our selected grades/subjects exceed the state average in all but one category — and frequently by sizeable margins.

school's full-time reading specialist introduces new teachers to Maryvale's balanced literacy program and the array of assessment tools used to closely track individual student progress. She'll model lessons, observe your teaching, and provide any resources you need. One of the school's two math teacher leaders (who coach two half-days a month) will provide similar support as you begin to apply your newly acquired MMI knowledge and skills.

New teachers are expected to return these favors in kind. "In some schools, new teachers get to play the 'new and stupid' role," laughs Marcelete Stewart, a veteran 5th grade teacher leader. "But we don't let them get away with that here. Our message is, 'You are bright and beautiful.' By taking that attitude, we bring new teachers with their fresh ideas and energy into our professional learning process."

A leader of leaders

It would not be accurate to describe Maryvale Elementary as a "turnaround" school. "Leapfrog" might be a better descriptor.

"As long as 15 or 20 years ago, Maryvale was a place where the school system was willing to try new things," says long-time staff member Debbie McLain, who taught in the primary grades before becoming the school's reading teacher.

Under former principal Joyce Hunter, Maryvale earned national recognition for its academic performance. When Terri Tomlinson took over the leadership post five years ago, the school's test scores were considered above average among schools with similar student populations. Since then, the scores have "skyrocketed" (as the *Alabama School Boards Journal* recently put it) in both math and reading.

"We have a long history of strong principals, and we have really benefited from consistent strong leadership," McLain says. "We probably take it for granted, but it's a big factor in our success. No matter how good you are, you still need that pressure from above."

Tomlinson manages to apply the pressure while maintaining loyalty and support. "I demand a lot from our teachers," she says with some pride. "I think it's good to have some anxiety. Not too much, but I think at times there needs to be some tension."

At the same time, Tomlinson says, teachers know "I will do anything for them that I can." First grade teacher Doretta Ash agrees. "If you bring her an idea, she'll support it. You get what you need, even if it means she has to go out and raise money."

Many of Maryvale's teachers "are the age of my children," says Tomlinson. "I have good relationships with most of them, but that doesn't get in the way of doing my job. I'm here for these children. Teachers know that. I tell them all the time that it's not an adult-centered place."

Tomlinson closely scrutinizes every part of the learning process in the school, examining samples of student work and talking directly with students about what they're learning. "She picks up on clues and pretty soon she knows exactly what's going on," says 5th grade teacher Kim Anez.

"They know I'm going to check on what I expect," Tomlinson explains. "I'm going to be checking SAT test results when we practice for them. I'm going to be checking writing samples when we test writing."

Teachers say they are okay with that level of inspection because they have high expectations for themselves. "We have a strong leadership structure in this school," says Stewart. "The teachers who stay here fit in this structure. She will be watching to see if you are meeting those expectations. If you aren't, she'll find someone who she thinks can help you resolve your issue. I feel very comfortable coming to her."

Third grade teacher Kendra Conner says that while Tomlinson gives the staff a lot of feedback, "teachers own what's going on here." It's clear on a visit to the school that the pool of potential teacher leaders is large. Perhaps that explains why, despite Tomlinson's visible efforts to encourage teacher leadership, a recent survey of the faculty indicated they didn't feel their ideas and talents were always being fully utilized.

The school's annual climate survey, begun three years ago, helps the staff identify priorities for improvement. The process includes an "asset mapping activity" in which the entire faculty participates without the presence of the principal. "This year," Tomlinson says, "the thing they felt needed most improvement was faculty leadership."

Stewart, who is trained to facilitate the mapping process, says the message wasn't intended to be critical of Tomlinson, simply that "We're always training and getting professional development, but we don't always share what we know and learn."

As a result of this finding, the school has established a new success indicator: *Teachers are equal stakeholders.* The school's many committees and action groups have been reorganized with fresh leadership and broader participation. Tomlinson has supported these changes enthusiastically. "I realized I had not done a good job of letting all people know they are superstars," she says. "If more people want to be leaders that has got to be a very positive sign on an already strong faculty."

The Maysville ripple effect

Maryvale's annual school climate survey is one of many spinoffs from the Maysville Math Initiative. Begun in 1998 with the support of the Mobile Area Education Foundation, the innovative program is often compared to the Alabama Reading Initiative for its cutting-edge staff development and its emphasis on student engagement and constant assessment of student progress.

The Initiative has had a profound effect on math achievement at Maryvale and three other Mobile County elementary schools. Over the first four years of the program, Maryvale's third-grade SAT-9 math scores rose from the 52nd percentile to the 74th; fourth grade from the 56th to the 74th, and fifth grade from the 58th to the 73rd.

"The math initiative required total staff development, a total change in teaching style and pedagogy," says Tomlinson. "It was like a total reversal for a lot of teachers from the way they had been teaching."

What teachers learned, says Doretta Ash, "is how we can help kids gain ownership of their learning. They ask questions about what they are learning and begin looking at their own work more critically. Part of what you learn through the Initiative's process is how to ask better questions of students to get them to reflect more deeply. Did you solve the problem? Can you justify it? Can you show me how you did it? Will it work every time? Did anybody else solve it another way?"

"We break them out of that mindset that there's only one way to

do it," adds Kim Anez. "They get excited about explaining their work. They learn they don't need to wait for the teacher to ask a question or tell them to think."

Tomlinson says teachers also rearranged how and what they taught. They no longer relied on the sequences laid out in the math textbook but adopted a content standards approach. "For instance, in fifth grade we began teaching fractions first, because fractions were one of the hardest and most important things to master. And we teach it all year."

"We also moved the five-minute drills, using them at the very last when they made sense. We teach the critical thinking first; we teach students to understand math first. When we go back and teach multiplication and division, it's easy for them because they understand it."

Through the Initiative, teachers also learned to calibrate their grading — setting the same standard of quality across classrooms — using the Looking at Student Work (LASW) process. "We wanted to make sure, for example, that every teacher in first grade was awarding a grade of 3 (proficient) for the same level of work," Tomlinson says. "We don't want to have one person inflating grades or another person deflating them."

The calibration began at grade levels and expanded to clusters, with K-2 teachers and 3-5 teachers scoring student work together. "We did this for over a year in math until we were all able to score our work individually with confidence that the teacher next door is making the same judgments about the quality of the work that we are making."

Reading specialist Debbie McLain says the lessons learned through the Maysville Math Initiative have rippled throughout the curriculum. In reading, for example, teachers are using their MMI training to ask more effective questions and promote more critical thinking.

MARYVALE ELEMENTARY PERFORMANCE COMPARISON
SAT-9 2002 – Average Percentile Scores

SUBJECT	All Maryvale Elementary Students	All Alabama Students	All Alabama Black Students	All Alabama Free Lunch Students
3rd Reading	**55**	50	34	36
4th Reading	**58**	55	37	39
5th Reading	**49**	51	35	36
3rd Math	**67**	54	40	41
4th Math	**65**	56	40	42
5th Science	**63**	54	36	38

Performance analysis: A typical achievement gap analysis is not useful at Maryvale Elementary, where a high percentage of students are minorities and eligible for free/reduced lunch. Here we've compared the average scores of Maryvale students with statewide scores for *all* students, all *black* students, and all *free-lunch* students. As the table shows, Maryvale has higher scores in all three categories in each grade and subject shown, with a single exception.

"It models the best kind of staff development, no matter what the content," she says. "All of our professional development now follows an upward spiral. You don't just get a day of staff development and plop back in the classroom. You hear it, you try it, you observe each other, you demonstrate what you've learned. It's the right model."

Closing the writing gap

If you asked Maryvale's educators to describe in a single word the most valuable thing they've learned from the Maysville initiative, they might choose the word *intensity*.

"The math initiative was almost totally consuming, because it was such a major reform," Tomlinson says. "Change at the level we were changing requires great intensity."

The school's total focus on math helps explain why another initiative — begun two years ago — was slow to have impact. Maryvale teachers were not satisfied with their school's mediocre performance on the state writing assessment and decided to adopt the Six Traits writing model, a national research-based program. Although three teachers eventually became Six Traits trainers, "I don't think we really bought into it as much as we needed to, because we were focusing so intently on the math initiative," Tomlinson says.

When last spring's 5th grade writing assessment scores were released by the state, Maryvale's grade of D-plus was a disappointment. "A writing teacher in our county said that inner-city kids don't have the intelligence or the readiness to do Six Traits," says Tomlinson. "And I said, 'I just don't believe that.'" The problem, she and her teachers decided, was not the Six Traits strategies but their own lack of training and intensity.

"We came to the conclusion that writing is an academic subject, just like reading or math," Tomlinson says. "And we saw that we had the same problem with writing that we had before with reading and math — we'd never been taught to teach these subjects effectively. We realized as a faculty that we had to learn how to teach writing and that's what we've been doing this year."

Although Maryvale did monthly schoolwide practice assessments in writing last year, students and teachers did not score the writing with customized rubrics, as they had learned to do in math. This year, Maryvale's teachers are applying the same single-mindedness that transformed math achievement to their teaching of writing.

"The focus is intense," Tomlinson says. "We are dipsticking on a regular basis. We write, we assess, we use rubrics to score our writing. We teach and test on the writing modes and monitor how we're doing all the time. We do a lot of Looking at Student Work at grade levels."

These grade level committees focus on "calibrating" the writing, coming to agreement on standards of good work. Their agendas and minutes, and the student papers, end up on Tomlinson's desk. "She reads every paper," says Marcelete Stewart. "If she's not satisfied, the message comes back: 'I do not see growth, writing committee. We need to ratchet up!'"

If Tomlinson sees problems with a particular teacher's writing instruction, "I'll talk to them individually and say, 'What's going on in your classroom? I don't really see that your kids are making any progress here. What can we do?" If teachers need outside help, Tomlinson arranges for a strong writing teacher to work with them.

LASW also promotes the kind of professional conversa-

Continued on page 19.

Characteristics of Highly Challen

Why do some high-poverty and high-m

Researchers have been pursuing this question vigorously in recent years. As a result of their research, some common characteristics of such schools are beginning to emerge. Here we've summarized the findings of several recent studies. High standards, high expectations, strong leadership, powerful professional development, and a culture of caring come up again and again. See pages 1 and 20 for web links to these studies.

A Major Research Review

A November 2002 report by the Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction described these strategies for closing the achievement gap, based on an exhaustive review of research on high-performing, highly challenged schools.

Changed beliefs and attitudes. The importance of beliefs and attitudes of teachers, parents, families, and students has been well documented. Genuine caring conveys a sense of value and worth to a student, which can lead to increased learning. Teacher expectations of themselves and their students also play a large role in how well students perform.

Cultural responsiveness. Learning begins with the learners' frame of reference. Teachers provide their instruction from their personal cultural framework, and students learn from within the context of their own experience. Research emphasizes the importance of honoring students and their heritages. Professional development for teachers needs to include culturally responsive content and skills.

Greater opportunities to learn. Schools can provide greater opportunities for students to learn by offering extended academic time (e.g., all-day kindergarten, before or after-school classes, summer school), using rigorous and challenging courses as the default curriculum, and expanding access in enriched and varied programs.

Effective instruction. The research literature specifically describes instructional practices that relegate minority or low-income students to lower level content rather than teaching thinking, understanding, and application skills. The "new science of learning" emphasizes the importance of learning with understanding. Such instruction has been shown to dramatically improve the performance of traditionally under-achieving students.

More family and community involvement. The notion of parental involvement extends beyond attendance at school functions or field trips. When parents encourage learning at home, express high but reasonable expectations, and support their children's education, low-income and minority students get better grades and test scores. The community can support extended educational opportunities for lower-achieving students. Close cooperation between schools, parents, and the community is one of the keys to closing the achievement gap.

A Study of Elementary Schools

The Dana Center at the University of Texas studied five high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools "that demonstrate it is possible to meet and even surpass high standards while including students with disabilities in state assessments and in the state accountability system." The report, *Expecting Success* (2002), described these practices that support high achievement.

High expectations. Each of the schools embraces the belief that all students can be academically successful. They set measurable and high goals for all students and focus on intensive, early intervention efforts to bring students up to grade level.

Teacher leadership. Administrators at these schools put the talents and experience of teachers to their best use. They encourage teacher creativity and leadership, align resources with instructional priorities, and collaborate with teachers and support staff in formulating instructional strategies.

Teacher collaboration. Faculty and staff at these schools regularly communicate across teaching areas and programs and are eager to learn from one another.

Data-driven instruction. Staff at each school use student assessment data to identify areas where students can improve and where their own teaching strategies can be adjusted to meet students' needs.

Student-centered learning. A culture of student-centered learning predominated at each of these schools. Attention was paid to areas where students were experiencing difficulty and students were provided opportunities to excel in areas of special interest.

Persistent intervention. Educators at these schools persist in addressing academic barriers to learning, collaborate with colleagues in identifying solutions to barriers, and participate in schoolwide intervention strategies such as tutoring and mentoring programs.

Parent partnerships. Faculty and staff at the five schools view parents as critical partners in the educational process. At each of the schools, parental participation is solicited and facilitated by faculty and staff.

Special education is last resort. While special education services are valued and supported at the schools, educators consider a referral for such services a last resort. Staff employ multiple intervention strategies before they determine that a referral for special education services is appropriate. Moreover, the schools provide formal opportunities for instructional staff to brainstorm additional interventions before referral for special education testing.

Special education is a path, not a destination. Educators at these schools share a view of special education as a means to fully integrate students into the regular education program. Students are provided every means of support and assistance they need, but educators view placement in special education as a temporary rather than permanent placement.

nged, High-Performance Schools

inority schools perform at high levels?

A Study of Middle Schools

Another study by the Dana Center (2002) examined seven high-performing, high-poverty middle schools in six states. The researchers found four shared characteristics of these "driven-to-succeed" schools.

Schools that are driven to succeed hold high expectations for all students. High expectations for all students moved people at these schools in a shared direction and helped eliminate distractions. This common purpose was sustained through making intentional choices to care about individual students by giving them opportunities to build meaningful relationships with adults. These relationships motivated students academically. Additionally, staff at these schools cared about each other as professionals. The schools also instilled pride and recognition for student and staff commitment to improved academic performance. Internal and external recognition validated staff and students and motivated them to excel. The schools stayed focused on high expectations for all. Hard work and visible results created an achievement momentum that inspired the staff to continue their efforts.

Schools that are driven to succeed are dedicated to collaborative environments. The schools built collaborative environments through creating a democratic environment in schools where staff input was valued and staff had considerable decision-making responsibility in their areas of expertise, as well as control over their professional growth. The schools redefined their relationships with districts so that districts supported schools and provided them with independence and decision making authority over issues such as curricular decisions and resource management. The schools also sought relationships with outside entities such as community organizations and universities. These outside entities provided additional student services and support beyond the capacity of the school.

Schools that are driven to succeed are committed to supporting teaching and learning through implementing thoughtful organizational structures and building the capacity of the system. The seven schools supported teaching and learning through implementing organizational structures such as student teaming, common planning time for teachers, block scheduling, and appropriate student behavior programs in ways that respected the unique situations and circumstances of each school context. They built capacity by using data to make informed decisions and determine areas of need. Staff were trained in how to understand data and use data to create systematic processes for targeting improvement areas. They also provided staff the flexibility to choose what professional development opportunities were most useful and provided professional development that was ongoing and in-depth. Professional development was expanded to include working with curriculum lead teachers, peer observation and coaching, and teaming.

Schools that are driven to succeed pay attention to individual students and provide extra services and support beyond those traditionally offered by schools. Being attentive to individual students required providing resources such as time and money for structured programs that allowed all students to be known by an adult and prevented students from being invisible. The schools extended the school day so that students had additional access to academic support and meaningful activities that gave students a sense of belonging. They expanded academic opportunities during the school day by offering students more time in academically oriented classes and more academically oriented electives, and by providing more access to academic supports, such as in-school tutoring. The schools also helped elementary students transition into the middle school setting through structured programs such as study skills workshops, buddy programs, and ongoing transition teams.

Teacher Leadership

A recent study by Just for the Kids, Inc. and the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality compared four high-poverty Texas schools – two high performers and two with average performance – and reached these conclusions.

1. Uniform high standards. In high-performing schools, *high standards and expectations were part of the culture.* Teachers and administrators understood that all newly hired staff *must* have high standards and expectations for *all* children. Experienced teachers believed the commitment to high standards and expectations was a necessary quality in job candidates. New teachers were provided the support and professional development necessary to help each child achieve.

2. Teaching to the highest level. High-performing schools have a *deep belief in student capacity to learn* and teachers' capacity to help students learn at high levels. In one school, every teacher participated in professional development for the instruction of gifted and talented students, with the expectation that all students would benefit from such instruction.

3. Frequent, relevant assessment. High-performing schools had more *systematic processes in place for multiple daily and weekly student assessments* through early and on-going data collection in usable formats. The importance of this information rippled throughout the system, allowing for targeted instruction and interventions based on precisely identified individual student needs. Through these formal and informal assessments, teachers in the high-performing schools were more likely to review, recreate, and share curriculum and instructional resources.

4. Learning from Peers. Teachers in the two high-performing schools were *more likely to watch each other teach*, and both administrators and teachers were more likely to point out exemplary teaching that others should emulate.

5. Collective Responsibility. In the high-performing schools, the entire school community shared responsibility for the growth and success of every student. In the average-performing schools, there was more isolation and compartmentalization among individuals and grade levels.

6. Strong Induction. In the high-performing schools, administrators and experienced teachers were *able to build on the pre-service teacher education* of their new hires, further developing their beginner's knowledge of teaching and learning. At one school, individual mentors were assigned to each novice. The other school assigned two mentors (one at grade level, one above or below) to both novice and experienced new hires. In both schools, all new teachers were observed and had multiple opportunities to observe more experienced teachers in action.

WEAVER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Heart, Passion and Conviction Equal High Performance

Weaver "Co-nects" with a can-do attitude.

A VISITOR WHO walks through the halls of Weaver Elementary will soon begin to notice the letters H-P-C posted on many classroom doors. It's a not-so-secret code.

"It stands for Heart, Passion and Conviction," says first-year principal Beth Harbin. "Those are three qualities we think you must have if you're going to be a good, effective teacher. You need to have a heart for children, a passion for teaching, and you have to have the conviction to do whatever needs to be done to help all students succeed."

The slogan, Harbin explains, is the legacy of a gifted principal, Mike Looney, who led the Calhoun County school through its first years of reform, cultivating not only high expectations but a belief that everyone connected to a school must be a learner — students, teachers, administrators, parents, and staff alike.

"If you want to know when we developed that heart, passion and conviction, I think that's after Mr. Looney came," says Harbin. "He had it, and he led us to find it in ourselves."

When Looney drops by later to join the conversation, he's a bit embarrassed by this praise.

"I think I had an easy job here," says Looney, who now works on teacher quality projects in the central office. "You surround yourself with people who care and you help them believe what they really want to believe anyway. You take risks with them, and you let them take risks."

He reflects for a moment, and then adds with some intensity: "I think what happened at Weaver is that people started daring to believe we could make a difference."

Narrowing the gap

Weaver is a small town on the outskirts of Anniston, not far from Fort McClellan, a defunct military base whose closure seven years ago sent surrounding communities into an economic tailspin.

"When I started teaching here 20 years ago," says assistant principal Loretta Brown, "we were a solid middle class school." When the fort closed, property values plunged, jobs dried up, and the little Weaver community, with no sizeable businesses of its own, struggled. "We have a ton of trailer parks," Brown says. "Many of the military people still own houses here and rent them out. We have a lot of transient families and students."

Weaver Elementary's nearly 700 students are mostly white (about 75 percent) and many are poor. More than 60 percent of the Title I school's children qualify for the federal free/reduced lunch program. Among the many Alabama schools with similar statistics, Weaver's academic performance stands out. In 2001, Weaver was named a Distinguished Title I School, and the school earned a coveted "A" on the state's SAT-9 "achievement ability comparison" for 2002.

As Alabama's accountability requirements expand to include subgroup scores and achievement gaps, no school can rest easy on an average. Like most schools with mixed student populations, when one looks at the performance of Weaver students by race or economic status (see page 14), significant achievement gaps are visible in some grades and subjects. But

Mostly White, Significant Poverty

Weaver Elementary School
Calhoun County (PK-6)

Principal – Beth Harbin
Phone – (256) 741-7100

SUBJECT 2002 SAT-9	Alabama Avg. Score[1]	School Avg. Score[1]	Alabama % Free Lunch[2]	School % Free Lunch[2]	Alabama % Minority[3]	School % Minority[3]
3rd Reading	50	**61**	41%	47%	39%	26%
4th Reading	55	**67**	40%	45%	38%	23%
5th Reading	51	**61**	39%	48%	38%	16%
6th Reading	53	**69**	37%	39%	38%	19%
4th Math	56	**72**	41%	43%	38%	24%
6th Math	59	**81**	38%	37%	38%	19%
5th Science	54	**65**	40%	49%	38%	16%

1. Average percentile score of all students at this grade level/subject.
2. Percent of students at this grade level who quality for free lunch (does not include reduced-price students).
3. Hispanic and African American students.

Comments: More than three-fourths of Weaver Elementary's students are white, and more than 60 percent of Weaver's students qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program.

Overall performance: Weaver's average scores for our selected grades/subjects outpace state averages by significant margins in every category.

these gaps are smaller than statewide gaps — often markedly smaller.

A few notable examples: In 5th grade science, the gap between Weaver's white and black students is 7 points. Across the state, the gap is 29 points. On the same test, the gap between fully paid and free-lunch students is 8 points at Weaver and 29 points across Alabama.

In 5th grade reading, Weaver's white/black gap is 9 points, compared to Alabama's 27 points. The fully paid/free-lunch gap is 10 points at Weaver and 28 points across the state.

Weaver Elementary's leadership team is most proud of the school's 6th grade math scores. While there is still a small achievement gap, the gap occurs at a very high level of performance. The scores for both black (76) and free-lunch (79) students nearly double state averages.

Sixth grade math teacher Linda Hardy, a 26-year veteran of the school, attributes the success to expectations. "It starts at the top," she says. "We rise or fall by what's expected of us, and the kids are the same way. We are expected to do the best we can for each child, which we try to do. And the kids know what we expect. We don't let them slide."

Among Hardy's key strategies:

- ***Daily Oral Math.*** "I take 10 minutes at the beginning of every class and do five problems. It's a variety of stuff I have and haven't taught them. I expose them all year long to math questions that are constructed in the same way they will see questions on the test. They'll see everything from algebra to geometry to regular basic math, from word problems to measurement to metrics. When test time comes, they will say 'Oh, yeah, Ms. Hardy, it was easy.' It was easy because we'd worked hard all year."
- ***Consistency.*** "I present the lesson, we do guided practice, we do independent practice. I give homework every night but Friday. I tell them the weekend is their playtime."
- ***Parent outreach.*** "If a child comes up consistently with three zeroes or incompletes, I send a note home. 'I need your help.' Most parents respond. Our sixth grade is notorious for having parent conferences. I don't want to have my name associated with a child who's going on to seventh grade who's not ready for that grade."
- ***Tutoring.*** "We offer tutoring to students who are at risk of failing." (The after-school program is run by teachers who receive supplemental pay; it's one hour twice a week with an 8-1 ratio.) "I tell the kids we're going to work closely together and help each other. You can really have some impact with such a small group."
- ***Conviction.*** "You need to have the conviction that every child can be successful. When those children come in that very first day with those bright, shiny faces, you need to think 'each one of you is capable of rising and becoming the cream of the crop.'"

"Outside the box" leadership

Mike Looney's career at Weaver stretched over five years, beginning with a one-year stint as assistant principal. Looney was already "outside of the box" when he arrived at Weaver in the fall of 1997.

A former Marine, Looney began his education career as an elementary teacher in the Pell City Schools. "I was looked at as an outcast there," he says. "I had a real basketball goal in my fourth grade room. One day we were shooting two-point free throws and the kids and a parent volunteer were graphing their shots. The principal swung the door open and shouted, 'What is going on in here?!' I said, 'We're graphing our shots! Come on in!' The next thing I knew, I was getting reprimanded because the kids were too excited. And I was thinking, what is *wrong* with this picture?"

Another time, after Looney was moved to fifth grade, "we had just finished learning about fractions and measurement. And my kids said, 'This is stupid. Why have we got to learn this?' So we came up this idea to build picnic tables for our school. They designed and drew scaled-down versions and built models with popsicle sticks. Then we dragged two-by-fours into the classroom, and the next thing you know, we had the kids measuring the lumber out, sawing and nailing. We were able to build picnic tables because we'd learned about measurement and fractions.

"I used that example with the faculty here. I remember how engaged those kids were, having a purpose for what they had learned. And I realized that's what school should be about."

When Looney attended his first Weaver PTO meeting as assistant principal, 12 parents came. "I looked at the principal and said 'where are all the parents?' And he said this was about typical; we just didn't have a lot of parent involvement. These are poor folks. These are transient folks." Looney believed the attitudes about parents pointed to a larger problem — a lack of faith in the potential of all students to succeed. "A year later, when I became the principal, I had a different level of expectations. And things started turning around."

Looney began a two-pronged effort to both improve instruction and strengthen the bond between adults and children in the school.

"It was a very messy process," he says. "I'd say it was organized chaos. We had some people who left as a result of the change. (But) everybody in this school got involved with kids. The teachers, the staff, and the administrators. I had kids every day in my office, reading with me. If a parent walked in and planned to stay for awhile, then that parent was reading to kids. It is just not acceptable here to not be active. If a child was not at school, we'd get in the car and go get the kid. I don't know how many times we've done this!"

"In the past," Looney reflects, "we thought about all the barriers to success. The kid's environment, he's never here, he's sick, he's black, he's poor. You can come up with all these barriers, but all it really takes is for someone to say 'How about this? How about this little success here, and this little success there? Aren't we beginning to make a difference for this child?'

"The next thing you know, everybody starts believing that we can make a difference. And the truth is, we *can*."

Comprehensive school reform

Research makes it clear that high expectations are critical to school success. But, as researcher Michael Fullan and others have found, teachers also have to gain confidence in their ability to teach all students effectively. Teachers need their own "little successes" with new practices and strategies.

At Weaver, some of the first successes came when the school joined the Alabama Reading Initiative and began to see

Continued on page 14.

WEAVER ELEMENTARY ACHIEVEMENT GAP ANALYSIS
SAT-9 2002 – Average Percentile Scores

SUBJECT	% White[1]	White[3]	Black[3]	School Gap	% Fully Paid Lunch[2]	Fully Paid Lunch[3]	Free Lunch[3]	School Gap
3rd Reading	74%	66	48	**18**	46%	71	54	**17**
4th Reading	77%	71	48	**23**	41%	79	53	**26**
5th Reading	81%	61	52	**09**	40%	68	58	**10**
6th Reading	79%	72	54	**18**	38%	76	63	**13**
4th Math	76%	75	54	**21**	42%	79	63	**16**
6th Math	78%	83	76	**07**	40%	85	79	**06**
5th Science	81%	65	58	**07**	39%	70	62	**08**

1. Percentage of Weaver students tested in this grade/subject who were white.
2. Percentage of Weaver students tested in this grade/subject who paid full price for school lunch. The free lunch column does not include reduced-lunch students.
3. Average percentile score

Gap analysis: If we examine the performance of Weaver students sorted by race and economic status, we can see significant achievement gaps in some grades/subjects. However, these gaps are smaller than statewide gaps among the same groups — and often markedly smaller. Among the most notable data: 6th grade math and 5th grade science and reading. The 6th grade math scores deserve special mention. While there is still a small "gap," the scores in for both black and free-lunch students nearly double the state average for their respective sub-groups. (See page 3.)

the ARI strategies working for their struggling students.

"I'll tell you why ARI has such an impact," says Beth Harbin. "It's because what they're teaching you to do *works*. And when you go back and try it and you get some success, you discover there really is such a thing as a 'best practice' and you can find out what those good practices are and use them to help kids learn better."

The Weaver faculty's conversations about schoolwide improvement accelerated over time. Looney urged the school to adopt what they now call "learning communities" — four schoolwide vertical teams made up of teachers, aides and staff, cutting across grade levels. Whole-school planning took on new meaning when the faculty began to gather for summer retreats focused on problem-solving.

When it came time to work on a schoolwide Title I plan and SACS reaccreditation, the faculty was ready to talk seriously about comprehensive school reform. "We realized that we wanted a formal mechanism to help us with the change process," Looney says. "So we began looking at reform models." In an education world flooded with school improvement packages, there was plenty to choose from. The Weaver faculty wisely began by exploring their own dreams and goals for the school.

"We had a lot of discussions about which reform model best suited our needs," says Looney. "We decided we wanted something that impacted all areas of our school, and not just reading, or just math. We wanted something that addressed technology in a meaningful way. We wanted something that made students' work authentic. We wanted our kids to have a purpose for learning and to internalize what was being learned."

After much searching, Weaver decided that Co-nect — a comprehensive reform program with a 10-year track record and a mix of on-site, off-site and on-line support — best matched the school's own vision of reform.

Co-nect organizes support for school change around five strands: leadership development, assessment and evaluation, curriculum focus, classroom strategies, and family and community. "Co-nect meshed well with ARI," Beth Harbin says. "After our first year with ARI, we didn't want to do something that was totally different from the ARI approach, because it was working so well for us."

With support from the Co-nect staff, assistant principal Loretta Brown wrote a successful proposal for a three-year, $300,000 federal CSRD grant which the school implemented last year. "Co-nect focuses on best practice research," says Brown. "They do a lot of project-based learning and technology integration. We have a Co-nect consultant who comes in for two days once a month. He does professional development, models lessons, works with kids in the computer lab." Co-nect emphasizes job-embedded staff development, with lots of follow-up.

"It may be our consultant, or me or Ms. Harbin," Brown says. "Teachers may go in other classrooms and model what they've been taught. But there's follow-up every time."

Thanks to Co-nect, ARI, and other successful experiences, Beth Harbin says, "All of our teachers seem hungry for professional development now. They really want it. We want to reach the point where when anyone is trying something new, someone else who is skilled in the technique will come in and observe them and give them some feedback."

When fifth grade teachers Diana Turley (social studies and reading) and Tracey Reeves (science) tick off the new skills and knowledge they gained over the past four years, the list is a long one that includes project-based learning, curriculum integration, ongoing classroom assessment, "backwards" lesson planning, student portfolios, reteaching, and more.

The school now builds its curriculum around nine-week, project-based units that emphasize hands-on learning and real-life application. "Driving questions" help integrate the curriculum across content areas and force students to apply their learning.

"One of my driving questions is, 'Is there one system in the human body that's more important than the others?'" says Reeves. "They don't just memorize the facts and the vocabulary about the human body. At the end of the unit they have to do a presentation to show me they can apply those facts and that knowledge to explore the driving question. Through these projects, we try to make what they're being asked to learn applicable to their own lives."

Weaver's teachers now regularly use rubrics and exemplars of excellent student work (available on the Co-nect website) to guide students

toward mastery. "It's hard to put together a rubric that really builds in all of your objectives and is specific enough to be meaningful," Turley says. "It's a lot of work and takes a lot of time, but it's worth it."

Other best practices

Parent outreach. Parents now pack the gym for PTO meetings. The school offers parenting and computer workshops for families, and annual grade-level orientations help parents understand what is expected of students and help teachers form stronger parent partnerships. Parents receive student test reports at school "where we can help give it some meaning," says Harbin. One strategy: Parents sitting with kids to write goals for improvement.

Data-driven planning. When the state announced last year that it would publish disaggregated performance data in August for the first time, Weaver didn't wait. In May, Brown took the raw results for 2002 and did her own crunching. "We analyzed as much data as possible so we'd have it on hand for our summer planning retreat. At the retreat we talked about where we saw gaps and brainstormed about ways we might close them — the strategies that we might use."

Progress monitoring. Each nine weeks Weaver's grade-level and support teachers meet to discuss the progress of every child. "We want to know who had a failing grade during the past nine weeks, and what are we going to do for each of those children," says Harbin. In the interim, grade-level teams track student progress at twice-monthly meetings.

A mix of pride and humility

"To be honest," Mike Looney confesses, "I don't think the reform model you pick is the most important thing. You need a sound framework for change, but change begins with conviction.

"When teachers begin to believe, they start to have conversations about how we can make a difference in students' learning. 'What about this journal article that I read,' or 'What about this book that we're studying.' When those kinds of conversations are taking place — instead of 'We're in proration, we don't have enough textbooks' — then you're on your way. Teachers begin to value their own professional expertise. I think the most powerful thing that has happened in this school is teachers learning from each other about what works."

Looney, Harbin and Brown all readily admit Weaver is a work in progress. "The truth of it is that the change process is just that — a process," says Looney. "Everyday expert practice requires some evolving on the part of a faculty, and I think this faculty is in the process of that evolution."

During the second year of a Co-nect partnership, member schools host a team of "critical friends" drawn from other Co-nect schools around the US. Brown says the team's February visit helped validate her faculty's own belief in Weaver's progress.

The Co-nect visitors "are looking for best practices," she says. "They go into each classroom, observe and interview teachers and students, look at student work. It's intensive. Then they rate us on a rubric in about 10 areas." The experience of having outsiders put your school under a microscope is bound to be anxiety-producing, but Brown says the feedback is invaluable.

"It helps us see our strengths and weaknesses more clearly." Weaver's leadership team was not surprised to hear, for example, that while they've made progress in integrating technology into everyday instruction, they have plenty of room to grow. "And we knew we were neophytes in project-based learning. So their recommendations in that area are very helpful to us."

As for strengths, "They were very complimentary about the engagement of our kids and how involved they were with their own learning. They could see a lot of writing going on in the school, and they talked about our students' ability to articulate what they were doing at a high level."

The Writing Gap. Like many other high-performing elementary schools (p. 19), Weaver educators were "shocked and dismayed" by their fifth-graders' poor performance on the Alabama writing assessment last spring. The assessment has been around for several years, so the results weren't really a surprise. But this time, for the first time, the assessment "counted" in the state accountability system. It was an attention-getter.

"During our summer retreat, all of the teachers were admitting they have a problem with the teaching of writing," says Beth Harbin. "They didn't feel they'd ever been trained well. They were eager for more professional development." This year, there's been more focus on writing during the Co-nect consultant's visits and more interest in best practice strategies. The school also staged two "practice runs" before the February 27 testing, using a format similar to the assessment. "We showed marked improvement in the second round," says Brown.

Harbin and Brown are working to create the mindset that every teacher at every grade level is responsible for writing. "We've said that the monkey shouldn't be on fifth grade's back," says Harbin. "If we all accept responsibility, by the time students get to fifth grade, it won't be a big deal. Our kids will have been writing since first grade.

"It's part of the bigger message that we all have to accept our part in the whole continuum of learning in this school. That's when we'll get the results we want. And our teachers are catching on." ❖

ONTHEWEB

Parent Outreach Can Help Close Gap

A new federal study of standards-based practices in Title I elementary schools finds that when teachers used three parent outreach strategies, their students tended to make greater gains in reading and math. Student achievement also increased when professional development programs were closely aligned to a school's reform plan.

http://tinyurl.com/5t12

CLARK MIDDLE SCHOOL

High Expectations and High Support for Every Student

Disadvantaged students excel at this school for science and math.

MARY SMITH MOVES like a magician as her hands fly back and forth between beakers filled with craft sticks marked to represent dominant and recessive genes. She matches up pairs and then calls out to her eighth graders: "What about these? Blue eyes or brown? Long eyelashes or short?" The kids, who sit around science lab tables in groups of three or four, puzzle over each combination and shout their answers with growing confidence as the activity progresses.

Smith repeats the process until she's satisfied that her introduction to heredity is sinking in. Yesterday, her students began to learn terms like "genotype" and "phenotype" and practiced using a Punnett Square to show possible gene combinations in a cross between two organisms. After a quick review this morning, they moved into the lab for this lively but carefully orchestrated activity.

"This was described in our textbook," she tells a visitor after class, "but they didn't do it exactly this way. In the way they described it, each group would have done this on their own. But I know with the maturity level of my kids that would have been too much for them to handle. So I adapted it and they did a very good job and understood."

Like all accomplished teachers, Mary Smith is skilled at adaptation, gauging the readiness and learning styles of her students, adjusting her lessons and instruction to fit, and deepening their understanding through application. Tomorrow, students will do a follow-up activity requiring them to predict whether a new baby will have dimples, based on the mother's dominant or recessive genes.

Accomplished teaching is evident in many classrooms at the K.J. Clark School of Mathematics and Science, a hybrid elementary-middle (grades 4-8) housed in a sprawling, single-story brick building on a quiet street in Mobile County's Chickasaw community.

One only has to scan the school's 2002 SAT-9 report to see that Clark's teachers get results. In most areas of reading, math and science, average scores are in the 70's and 80's. Many casual observers would not find that surprising. "It's a magnet school, after all."

Looking beyond "magnetism"

It's true that Clark — which became a "school of mathematics and science" 11 years ago as part of Mobile's desegregation settlement — has some of the advantages we often associate with magnet programs.

There is less transiency. Attendance is a bit higher than the county average. Serious discipline violations are grounds for immediate expulsion at Clark, but most behavior problems are managed as they are in any well-run school, employing a

Majority Black, Significant Poverty

K.J. Clark School of Mathematics and Science
Mobile County (4-8)

Principal – Dianne McWain
Phone – (251) 221-2106

SUBJECT 2002 SAT-9	Alabama Avg. Score[1]	School Avg. Score[1]	Alabama % Free Lunch[2]	School % Free Lunch[2]	Alabama % Minority[3]	School % Minority[3]
4th Reading	55	**68**	40%	33%	38%	56%
6th Reading	53	**75**	37%	31%	38%	53%
8th Reading	51	**73**	33%	30%	36%	53%
4th Math	56	**72**	41%	35%	38%	57%
6th Math	59	**83**	38%	31%	38%	52%
8th Math	53	**85**	33%	29%	36%	52%
5th Science	54	**71**	40%	40%	38%	49%
8th Science	59	**78**	33%	31%	36%	54%

1. Average percentile score of all students at this grade level/subject.
2. Percent of students at this grade level who quality for free lunch (does not include reduced-price students).
3. Hispanic and African American students.

Comments: More than 50 percent of K.J. Clark's students are minorities, mostly African American. A growing percentage of the school's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (about 50% percent last year, 56% this year), and the school became a Title I school in 2001. As a math/science magnet school, Clark accepts students, via a lottery, from across Mobile County. New students must have passing grades and no more than two suspensions in the previous year.

Overall performance: Clark's average scores for our selected grades/subjects outpace state averages by significant margins in every category.

CLARK MIDDLE SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT GAP ANALYSIS
SAT-9 2002 – Average Percentile Scores

SUBJECT	% White[1]	White[3]	Black[3]	School Gap	% Fully Paid Lunch[2]	Fully Paid Lunch[3]	Free Lunch[3]	School Gap
4th Reading	43%	57	62	**13**	49%	75	60	**15**
6th Reading	45%	83	67	**16**	49%	80	68	**12**
8th Reading	45%	77	69	**08**	59%	75	70	**05**
4th Math	43%	79	67	**12**	48%	78	66	**12**
6th Math	45%	87	79	**08**	49%	87	75	**12**
8th Math	46%	88	82	**06**	60%	88	82	**06**
5th Science	51%	79	61	**18**	47%	78	63	**15**
8th Science	44%	85	69	**16**	59%	82	70	**12**

1. Percentage of Clark students tested in this grade/subject who were white.
2. Percentage of Clark students tested in this grade/subject who paid full price for school lunch. The free lunch column does not include reduced-lunch students.
3. Average percentile score.

Gap analysis: If we examine the performance of Clark students sorted by race and economic status, we can see achievement gaps in some grades/subjects. However, these gaps are smaller than statewide gaps among the same groups — often markedly smaller. Among the most notable data: 8th grade math, 8th grade reading and 6th grade math. The 8th grade math scores deserve special mention. While there is still a small "gap," the scores for both black and free-lunch students nearly double the state average for their respective sub-groups. (See page 3.)

cycle that begins with warnings, then detention, in-school suspension and counseling. Among Clark's 800 students, fewer than a dozen are expelled each year for discipline reasons.

Magnet school academic standards are set by the district. Students must maintain a 70 average in math and science for the year and pass their other classes with at least a 60 average. "Although we work hard to help them keep their grades up, we do have some students who don't have the average at the end of the year," says counselor Ann Crumpton. "They either return to their district school, or they can choose to repeat the whole grade."

It's an article of faith in school circles that parents who are willing to jump through the hoops required to enroll a child in a magnet school are more likely to be involved in the child's education and provide more support from home. But teachers at Clark say they have their share of parents who are unwilling or unable to provide academic support. "We get good support overall," says one, "but we work at it, and we have the same small core group of very involved parents that is typical of many schools."

Outsiders will also argue that magnet schools get to "pick" their students. That's not quite how it works at Clark and other Mobile magnet programs. Students are chosen by lottery, using a system that seeks a 50-50 racial balance between black and non-black students. As Clark's demographic data shows, many of the school's students also come from low-income families (nearly 60 percent of this year's students are in the free-and-reduced lunch program).

Students can enter the magnet-school lottery if they have "passing" grades and no more than two suspensions at their home school the previous year. Most students enter Clark in fourth or sixth grade. "We have kids come to us who just barely passed on D's," says Clark principal Dianne McWain. "We also receive children from schools that are labeled as 'low-performing' by the state. So to say that we have the cream of the crop is not a fair statement."

Perhaps the fairest way to measure a magnet school's educational quality is to determine how well its educators are doing with the crop of students they do have. A fair question, given Clark's diverse student population, might be: *Are most kids succeeding, or is high achievement limited to advantaged students?*

Using that standard, Clark is a high-performing school. As our analysis shows, the achievement gaps between Clark's black and white students, and between free- and fully paid lunch students, are significantly smaller than state averages. Most important, the scores for both black and free-lunch students are much higher than the state averages for their subgroups (page 3).

Subgroup performance is not much on the minds of Clark's teachers. "I couldn't tell you which kids are and which kids aren't free-reduced lunch," says Smith, who chairs the school's science department. "It's just not something we think much about here. We have high expectations for all of them."

Science teacher Tillman Holston agrees. "Our students wear uniforms. Everybody is the same and has equal footing. You may have access to their records, but in the moment of teaching and working with them, we have across-the-board expectations. And I think lots of times kids will rise to that, regardless of where they've come from."

Indicators of high performance

Many of the characteristics or "indicators" of high-challenge, high-performing schools (see pp. 10-11) appear to be present at Clark.

Teacher collaboration. Clark's teachers regularly plan interdisciplinary lessons and projects together, including the annual schoolwide science fair (which this math-science magnet takes very seriously). Math teachers help with data calculations and graphing. English teachers work on research skills and note-taking, and they teach 8th graders how to write their science papers in MLA style.

"We work collaboratively on lessons several times a week," says Kathleen Pigue, the English teacher on Smith's 8th-grade team. "We have so many interdisciplinary lessons, we have to." Learning tends to seep through classroom doors and across hallways. While Smith is working on her genetics unit, Pigue is teaching Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. The award-winning science

Continued on page 18.

Continued from page 17.

fiction novel describes a closed society where reproduction is tightly controlled. As students reached the book's ambiguous ending, Smith was peppered with questions about inherited traits. "That's not unusual," she says. "Sometimes when they're writing in English, they'll run across the hall and say, 'We need to know if this or that is true or not,' or I'll send them across to find out if this or that word is the right word to use in our science writing. We do a lot of cross communication."

Professional growth. Teachers at Clark frequently enroll in content-area graduate classes and seek out professional development opportunities, sharing what they learn with colleagues in department and grade-level meetings and by observing in each other's classrooms. Several years ago, the science department participated in an anatomy program for teachers at the University of South Alabama. "It was held on weekends for six weeks and covered all the major human systems," says Holston, who has used the new knowledge in his honors biology classes, where students can earn high school credit.

McWain encourages teachers to attend national conferences in their specialty areas. "I also encourage teachers to take leadership roles in staff development," she says. She says most teachers at Clark are highly motivated to increase their skills and knowledge "and I don't have to be a dictator. I constantly work to create the opportunities and let them decide where they need or want more professional training. This is a faculty that's good about trying new ideas."

Data-driven planning and student assessment. Teachers and professional staff begin each school year with three or four days of professional development work, including a close analysis of student assessment data. McWain says teachers are aware of every SAT-9 question missed by each of their students. "We look at every child's results and plot strategies for those students," says Kathleen Pigue. Last August the faculty dissected the school's 5th and 7th grade writing assessment results and agreed to sharpen their focus on writing skills. Students are writing in every subject, including math, McWain says, "and the language arts department is taking a lead role in doing some after-school training with teachers."

Innovative scheduling. At the beginning of the 2001-02 school year, Clark's middle school teachers abandoned their seven-period day and adopted a rotating, six-period schedule with two daily 75-minute blocks. "It had an immediate impact on learning," McWain says. "The kids and teachers loved it."

Although the schedule can be confusing to the uninitiated (see above), scheduling veterans will quickly grasp how it works, as it revolves through a continuous cycle of six school days (designated A-F). McWain describes some advantages of this approach to time management:

- "The schedule gives my teachers time to introduce a lesson during a regular class period and then do more hands-on activities and small group work during a 75-minute block the next day. It's extremely difficult to do anything that's exploratory in a 50-minute class."
- "Teachers also have more planning time because the 75-minute blocks rotate through their planning periods."
- "Teachers are more accessible to parents. By moving their planning periods from early morning to afternoon over each six-day cycle, teachers can now meet with parents who can only come in the morning or in the afternoon."
- "Another reason we did it was to address the learning styles of kids. For example, some children are just not going to learn math at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. But when math rotates to their morning classes, they do better. ADD kids also do better in the morning in certain classes."
- "On a regular basis, every teacher has every group of kids early in the morning when the students fresh and ready to go. That's one reason why we moved homeroom to 10 a.m."

Clark teachers describe other advantages. "Just by virtue of being a middle school with a lot of activities, there are a number of occasions when we're out of class for assemblies and that sort of thing," says Tillman Holston. "Those things often happen about the same time of day. When you're rotating your class periods, you don't always have the same groups of students missing your class."

"The best part to me is getting to see the kids at different times during the day," Mary Smith says. "Because those kids who are angels at the beginning of the day can be absolute devils by the end." By the same token, says Kathleen Pigue, "they all get us at our best on several days each week. I'm a morning person, that's when I'm at my peak. So with this schedule, there's no group of kids who are always catching me at the end of the day."

Student engagement. Evidence of hands-on learning is easy to find at Clark, from the aquaculture room where students raise fish to a new math lab staffed by a full-time teacher who emphasizes real-world applications, manipulatives and integrated projects. This year the school joined The Jason Project's online expedition to the California Channel Island region. The Project's interdisciplinary, multimedia curricular approach stresses inquiry-based learning across science, English language arts, math, and fine arts.

Teachers also vary instruction to address different learning styles. "Within one class period, you offer it all," says Helen Miles. "I don't favor one way of teaching over the other. You present it in every way you can."

High expectations and high support. Teachers at Clark expect a great deal from their students, and they hold the same high expectations for themselves. "When I first came here four years ago," Smith recalls, "one of the things that was most incredible to me was the absolute

Clark School of Mathematics and Science Rotating Class Schedule (Grades 6–8) with Two 75-minute Blocks

TIME/DAY	A	B	C	D	E	F
7:40 – 8:55	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
8:58 – 9:48	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	1st
9:53 –10:08	Homeroom/Break					
10:11–11:01	3rd	4th	5th	6th	1st	2nd
11:04–12:48	4th	5th	6th	1st	2nd	3rd
12:53 –01:43	5th	6th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
1:46 – 2:36	6th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th

Lunch schedule by grade: (6th) 11:04-11:29, (7th) 11:40-12:05, (8th) 12:23-12:48.

level of commitment to the kids that the teachers here have. Our after-school tutoring program is supported by Title I now, but that's a recent development. Before there was any money to pay teachers, they were here after school with the kids who needed help, volunteering their time. They would tell them "You're going to come to tutoring after school. I know your mom's over in Dauphin Island or someplace that's a long way away. But let's talk to Mom and make it happen. It wasn't 'Can you stay?' It was 'You need to get this. We're going to work it out.' And it was just amazing to me — the forthrightness of this faculty, to take the initiative, to say you need this and we will find a way for you to get it."

Eighth grade math teacher Helen Miles believes the intensive tutoring helps explain Clark's high achievement. Many parents care, she says, "but they may not be able to help their kids enough at home. So we offer them what no one else can offer them, and that's an opportunity after school. If you provide tutoring they don't have to pay for, and you are actually willing to stay with them as long as it takes, then you can make a big difference."

Miles can lay claim to some of the school's most impressive SAT-9 scores. Last year both her black and free-lunch students had an average score of 82 on the 8th grade math exam. "I don't give my students an option," says the African American teacher, who grew up in Greenville, Alabama.

"I grew up just like these kids. When they come to me with an excuse, it doesn't wash. I've been there. So I don't get too many students who won't do their homework or won't study for the test. Although they have some disadvantages, I expect the same effort from all of them. I will work with them, and help them catch up if that's what they need. But there are no excuses." ❖

Maryvale Elementary

Continued from page 9.

tion that researchers say is a critical piece of teacher growth and development. Kendra Conner sees that happening at Maryvale. "Another teacher may have something better — a new idea — that comes out when we're examining the student work together."

The power of the Looking at Student Work process — which incorporates reflection, calibration, and ongoing assessment — is so great, Tomlinson says, that it is rapidly becoming an integral part of the school's improvement process in all content areas. "We're moving to use that as a reflection on the classroom and a reflection on what's going on across the school."

Last November, a consultant to the Alabama Best Practices Center conducted an informal evaluation at Maryvale. This excerpt from Ed Moscovitch's report captures the essence of this high-performing, high-poverty school:

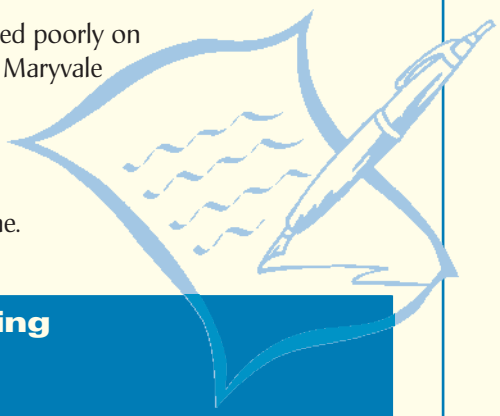
There are lots of good things going on at Maryvale, but I think the underlying element is that the principal and faculty have very high expectations for their students. One teacher told me she'd previously taught at a Mobile County magnet school and that what the teachers at Maryvale asked their students to do was as high as, if not higher than, the magnet school. Another teacher explained to me that when he arrived the principal told him that he should double whatever he had previously thought these children should accomplish — and that each year she approaches him to make sure he keeps raising his expectations. ❖

The Writing Gap

In the 2001-02 testing period, Alabama assessed student writing skills in grades 5 and 7, in four areas of writing instruction. Since all of our featured schools have a grade 5, only fifth grade performance is shown here. The fifth grade writing assessment was included in the state's high-stakes accountability system for the first time in 2001-02.

Many otherwise high-performing schools got a "wake-up call" when their students performed poorly on the assessment. For example, on the recently released 2002 state report cards, Central Park, Maryvale and Weaver all earned an "A" for their SAT-9 achievement and a "D" on fifth-grade writing.

Each of our featured schools launched a major new focus on writing instruction during the current school year, emphasizing schoolwide writing activities and new staff development for teachers, many of whom say they are learning effective writing strategies for the first time. Principals predict this intense focus on writing will raise scores significantly.



Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing
2001-02 / Fifth Grade
Percent Meeting Standard

	Alabama	Weaver EL	Clark MS	Central Park EL	Maryvale EL
Holistic composition	31%	19%	35%	23%	23%
Writing mechanics	49%	55%	72%	44%	43%
Sentence formation	43%	42%	72%	28%	41%
Grammar and usage	40%	31%	72%	19%	28%

ONTHEWEB *Closing the Achievement Gap*

See our complete list of achievement gap resources at: http://www.bestpracticescenter.org/publ/wte3-1-res.html

"Closing the Achievement Gap"
Kati Haycock, the director of the Education Trust, explores why differences in academic performance are widening among ethnic and racial groups. To increase the achievement levels of minority and low-income students, she says, we need to focus on three things: high standards, a challenging curriculum, and good teachers. (*Educational Leadership*, March 2001)

http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/edlead/0103/haycock.html

When We Insist Kids Can Learn, They Do
K-6 principal Susan Williamson turned her high-poverty school around by changing culture and emphasizing data. This newspaper story describes how Williamson restored order and discipline, scrounged for additional dollars to get better training for her teachers, and moved her faculty to a reliance on data to drive classroom instruction.

http://tinyurl.com/5gj8

High-Performing, High-Poverty Elementary Schools
Expecting Success (2002) is a study of five high-performing, high-poverty Texas elementary schools that demonstrate it is possible to meet and even surpass high standards while including students with disabilities in state assessments and in the state accountability system. (PDF file)

http://www.ccsso.org/pdfs/ExpSuccCaseStudies.pdf

"Turnaround Middle Schools"
This study (2002) from the Dana Center at the University of Texas investigates how seven high-poverty middle schools managed to demonstrate strong academic improvement so that they were performing at levels consistent with, and in many cases better than, higher-income schools in their states. Volume 1 of the study contains the cross-case analysis. Volume II offers a case study of each school. (PDF files)

http://www.utdanacenter.org/research/reports/ms_vol1.pdf

http://www.utdanacenter.org/research/reports/ms_vol2.pdf

Differences Among High-Poverty Schools
Case studies in four high-poverty Texas schools (two average- and two high-performing) looked for practices that might account for differences in achievement among similar students. This article in the *Best Policies and Practices* newsletter of the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality summarizes nine findings.

http://www.teachingquality.org/newsletter/issues/v02/v02n07.pdf

Community Dialog about the Achievement Gap
This free online guide, "Dialogue and Action to Help Every Student Succeed," can be used to generate deep conversation among communities and schools about the meaning of "a good education" and ways to break through barriers that keep some students from succeeding. Developed by the Study Circles Resource Center and the National School Public Relations Association. (PDF file)

http://www.studycircles.org/pdf/nsprabonus.pdf

"The Secrets of Can-Do Schools"
A study of 12 high-performing, high-poverty schools in Louisiana found 12 common characteristics, including highly focused, job-embedded professional development. The schools' can-do spirit impressed researchers. "They literally just roll over obstacles and they believe that no obstacle is too great." (NSDC *Results*, February *2003)*

http://www.nsdc.org/library/results/res2-03rich.html

Working Toward
EXCELLENCE
THE JOURNAL OF
THE ALABAMA
BEST PRACTICES CENTER

P. O. Box 4433
Montgomery, AL 36103

Be sure you receive **EVERY** *free issue!*

Use the postage-paid card inside or send your address to signup@bestpracticescenter.org